

Discussion: Ontario's Most Vulnerable Need Income Security for Health and Human Dignity

Even as the province slowly pulls out of the recession, nurses see polarization growing between the rich and the poor. As the middle class shrinks, the numbers of those at the lower end of the income scale grows. Too many Ontarians are still finding themselves struggling to survive as they are unemployed, underemployed, or in low-waged, precarious jobs.

Ontario Needs to Keep Increasing the Minimum Wage

Today a single person working full-time at the current minimum wage of \$10.25 per hour makes a pre-tax annual income that is \$2,242 short of the poverty line.¹ If that same minimum wage worker is supporting two more people in the family for a household size of 3 persons, the family will be \$14,035 below the poverty line.

Nurses know that poverty results in illness and early or premature deaths.

Without disclosing any identifying information, we would like to share with you a few illustrations from our practice about the challenges that some of our clients/patients living in poverty are facing every day.

QUESTION: Will your party support increasing the minimum wage by 75 cents per hour each year over the course of the next mandate, so that people working full-time can rise above the poverty line? This means the minimum wage would increase to \$11 per hour in 2011, \$11.75 in 2012, \$12.50 in 2013, and \$13.25 in 2014.

Ontario's Social Assistance Rates Are Dangerously Low

Other community members are not able to work due to health or disability challenges. Altogether more than 830,000 Ontarians currently receive social assistance benefits through either the Ontario Works (OW) or Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP).

Ontario's nurses were delighted with the government's announcement on November 30, 2010 of a comprehensive review of the provincial social assistance system to be led by Frances Lankin and Munir Sheikh. It is critical that the current punitive, complicated system of contradictory rules and regulations be transformed to a person and family-centred system that treats everyone with dignity.

Social assistance rates are not linked to the real cost of living. For example, including the most recent one per cent increase in social assistance rates in November/December 2010, a single person receiving OW has \$592 per month and a single person on ODSP has \$1,053 per month available to meet all of his or her needs. The average rent for a bachelor's apartment in Toronto is \$802 per month and food expenses using Nutritious Food Basket data for Toronto in 2010 is \$226.24 per month. That leaves a deficit of \$436.24 each month for a person receiving OW. People literally cannot pay the rent

¹ Assuming working 37.5 hours per week full-time employment and calculated using the Before Tax Low Income Cut-Off, 2009 for 1 person and 3 persons family unit living in an urban area of 500,000 and over

<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75f0002m/2010005/tbl/tbl02-eng.htm>

let alone buy nutritious food as well as other essentials such as toilet paper, personal hygiene and cleaning supplies.

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QUESTION: As a down-payment towards addressing the gap between dangerously low assistance rates and nutritional requirements, will your party support an immediate increase of social assistance rates by \$100 per month for every adult as a Healthy Food Supplement?